ROBERT E. LEE

THE CONSUMMATE SOLDIER

by

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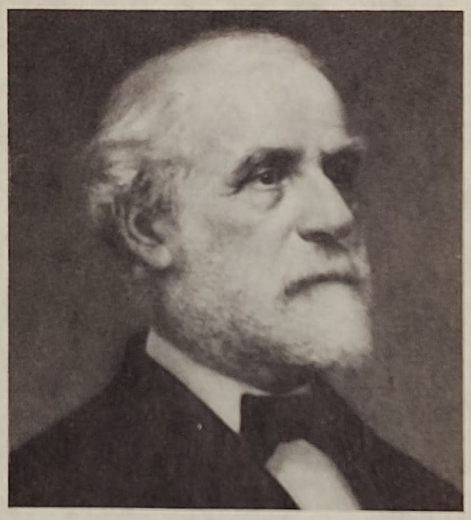
ROBERT EDWARD LEE was the most consummate soldier that this nation ever produced. Descended from English stock stretching back beyond 1066, the fifth son of Revolutionary War hero Henry "Light Horse Harry" Lee, he was born January 19, 1807, in Westmoreland County, Virginia. He entered the U.S. Military Academy in 1825, graduated second in his class, and embarked on an army career as a lieutenant of engineers.

His 1831 marriage to Mary Ann Randolph Custis, the great-granddaughter of Martha Washington, produced seven children (including two sons who became Confederate generals). Lee compiled an admirable record during seventeen years as an engineer. Army installations from St. Louis, Missouri, to Fort Monroe, Virginia, bear his handicraft. The Mexican War brought him three brevet promotions for gallantry. Lee served as superintendent of West Point prior to his 1857 assignment as lieutenant-colonel of the famed 2nd U.S. Cavalry. In October, 1859, he was on leave at his adopted home, "Arlington," overlooking Washington, when he was ordered to lead a detachment of Marines to quell John Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry.



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For months thereafter, with storm clouds of civil war gathering on the horizon, Lee wrestled with his conscience as to the course he should pursue. He had devoted his life to the Union; he abhorred both slavery and the concept of secession; yet he could not bear the thought of drawing his sword against Virginia. The dilemma he faced became more acute when he was tendered command of all Union armies. In the end, love for his native state was the overriding factor, and Lee reluctantly followed Virginia into the Confederate States of America.

He took charge at once of the Old Dominion's land and naval forces. His alacrity at getting military units organized and into the field was a leading factor in the South's victory in the first major battle of the Civil War at Manassas (Bull Run). Lee then became a military troubleshooter for the Confederacy. Frustrating assignments in Western Virginia and at Charleston, South Carolina, did little for his reputation. Then, On May 31, 1862, President Jefferson Davis appointed Lee to succeed the wounded Joseph E. Johnston as commander of the Army in Northern Virginia. Thus began a near-perfect relationship between general and army.

When Lee rode to Seven Pines to join an army trying to defend Richmond but heavily outnumbered, he was fifty-five years of age, 5 feet, 11 inches in height, with 170 pounds distributed evenly on his erect frame. He had enjoyed a lifetime of remarkably good health. The burdens and anxieties of the Civil War would break him badly, turn his hair snow white, and hasten his death. Yet the fact remains that no other figure could have sustained the Confederate cause as long as Lee did.

The reasons for his success in battle were many. Lee was a brilliant student of military strategy, as well as a man totally devoted to duty. He was also extraordinarily perceptive. Against opposing generals he employed psychology before that science came into being. He was also exceedingly audacious —"born to make the attack," his chief biographer exclaimed. And in battle, Lee believed not in winning a limited victory but in pounding an opponent into helpless submission.

He won smashing triumphs in the Seven Days, at Second Manassas, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, the Wilderness, and Cold Harbor. He held his own against superior odds at Sharpsburg (Antietam Creek), Gettysburg, Spotsylvania, and during most of the nine-month besiegement of Petersburg. After four years of combat, however, Lee was powerless to overcome dwindling manpower, evaporation of Southern resources, and constant pressure from the ever-increasing Union military machine. He became the only American general ever to lose a war when, on Palm Sunday, 1865, he surrendered his army at Appomattox.

Lee then converted failure into greatness. He accepted the presidency of impoverished Washington College in Lexington, Virginia. Singlehandedly, he revitalized the faculty, facilities, and curriculum of that institution. Lee steadfastly refused to engage in widespread postwar recriminations; constantly did he urge his fellow Southerners to put aside all animosity for the sake of a reunited nation. The general had become the most revered individual in America when his weary heart ceased on October 12, 1870. Today he sleeps beneath Edward Valentine's recumbent statue on the campus of Washington and Lee University.

Dr. Robertson is the distinguished author/editor of 18 books and more than 60 articles on the Civil War. He is a consultant for Time-Life Books, is a contributor to Encyclopedia Americana and is the former Executive Director of the U.S. Civil War Centennial Commission.